Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream.
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.

This childhood song popped into my mind one day last fall for reasons I no longer remember or perhaps never knew. For me, it had always been one of those songs we sang on the camp bus coming home at the end of the day. It was among a popular collection that included ‘one hundred bottles of beer on the wall,’ and classics about spoiled liverwurst and woolen underwear. But I had recently announced my retirement and suddenly I was more aware of the song’s conclusion than its beginning: “life is but a dream.” Instantly, this song had new meaning for me and it wasn’t childish at all. So I decided to research the song’s origin and symbolism, thinking there may be more to the rowing of the boat than just a camp song.

According to The Americana Song Reader by William E. Studwell, (via Wikipedia) “it has been suggested that the song may have been a “ditty of minstrel origins.” The earliest printing of the song is from 1852, ... The modern tune was first recorded with the lyrics in 1881, ...

Various interpreters claim that, “the lyrics have often been used as a metaphor for life's difficult choices,…; that “rowing is a skillful, if tedious, practice that … also directs the vessel.” When sung as a group, the act of "rowing becomes a unifier, as oars should be in sync for the progression of a rowboat. “The idea that human beings travel along a certain stream [of time] … The third line, Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, recommends that challenges should be greeted in stride while open to joy with a smile …. And that the final line, "life is but a dream," is perhaps the most meaningful. … Life and the "physical
plane may be regarded as having equivalent value as that of a dream,...”

Dr. Don Williams offers a different perspective. “Row Row Row means you are going to have to do something. You don't just row, you work at it. This is not a one shot deal; you're going to have to DO something consistently. Row "YOUR" boat, meaning don't worry about anyone else's boat, worry about your boat. …

How are you going to do this? This is the key! "Gently" down the stream. Don't be vigorously trying to go up stream and against the natural flow. …"Gently" down the stream … means you're in flow with the universe because everything that is Godly simply flows; it cannot be forced. Remember force creates resistance.

Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily… Be happy, this [life] is not a dress rehearsal, this is the real thing. We get one shot in this lifetime, so make it an enjoyable journey. It says Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, not grudgingly, grudgingly, grudgingly, grudgingly don't waste time being upset and angry, enjoy your life.

Life is but a Dream… ok so if this is the case, [do not make] it [into] a nightmare….”

Many segments of my life now seem like a dream. As formative as our childhood years are, my eighteen years of growing up in Fall River ended nearly a half century ago. I am long since not that child and the people, family, friends and community, especially the synagogue communities of which I was a part, are gone. I surely have memories, good and bad, but I wonder sometimes – do you – if my memories are accurate or have I transformed partial facts and wishful thinking into memories? One set of childhood thoughts I remember for certain was a desire to grow up, to be in college, to be on my own, to fall in love and have a family. What was my rush? As George Bernard Shaw said “youth is wasted on the young.” My nine years of college and rabbinical school are also a dream. I struggle to remember the thinking of the shy, naive, young man who first walked through the gates of the Jewish Theological Seminary as a freshman in 1966. I
entered planning to become a rabbi and doubtless left nine years later knowing almost as little about the profession of the congregational rabbinate as when I started. Certainly, I learned Hebrew and Jewish history, philosophy, and classical texts of Jewish law and lore, all valuable to my life as a Jew, but of unclear value in the pulpit.

I no longer remember what I planned to do in Bethlehem when I arrived to become the rabbi of the Brith Sholom Community Center in August of 1975. I surely did not anticipate that the Conservative Movement over the course of my decades in the rabbinate would be dominated by social issues: the women’s issue, the gay lesbian issue, the interfaith issue and now, seemingly, the transgender issue. While each one was, and is, important and needed to be addressed, none of them has led to the growth of the Conservative Movement nor, apparently, to the broad strengthening of Jewish tradition and learning from the perspective of Conservative Judaism. They also did not lead to the diminishing or weakening of the movement, but prevented us from focusing on the traditionally committed Conservative Jews. For that failure, I am doubtless to blame as much as any of my colleagues in the rabbinate. One of the first questions I was asked by Bruce Smackey, the chair of the Search Committee in 1975, was could I handle failure. I was sure I could and I told him so. Fortunately, I was right, because there have been many failures and even in the months remaining before I retire, I suspect there will be more.

The thirty-eight completed years here at Brith Sholom are also like a dream. I surely remember many people and events, but not always with the clarity I would like. Even worse, I realize that many people and events who were critical to the community for longer than I have been at Brith Sholom are completely unknown to many of you sitting here today. We are sitting - here - today because of some of these people and events, and yet their lives and actions are like a dream, vague, lost upon waking. The stream of time has taken them away. I will not begin to enumerate the people individually, who rowed together, not always gently and merrily, but in sync for the community, because my greatest fear is that I would unintentionally leave someone out. But there are a few events
that emerge out of my dreamlike memory which I think are important not only for the past and the present, but also for the lessons they might teach for the future.

There are times when we, as a Jewish community have made a real difference in people’s lives; some of these individuals were total strangers and some we knew very well. In 1982, well before the issue reached the consciousness of much of the larger Jewish community with Operation Moses in 1984, about 100 households out of our then 240 membership each contributed $30 or more to save the life of an Ethiopian Jew. In those days, the American Association of Ethiopian Jewry was buying Jews, bringing them to safety, for $3,000 each. We have no idea who was saved by our funds, but as a community, we saved someone’s life. When the teenage Hekmati girls from Iran were left in our care by their parents, at a time when the Iranian government did not allow their father to emigrate, many of our members came to their aide. From helping them to establish an apartment, to handling the paperwork and rigors of public education to seeing them through high school graduation and into college, members of Brith Sholom stepped up and did whatever was necessary. The same was true for Russian Jewish families we helped resettle here in Bethlehem. We had the guidance of Jewish Family Service, but it was our members who set up apartments, fully furnished by us, helped find jobs and even transported some to work. And we also gave major assistance to Boris Levin, one, young Russian Jew, who appeared as the revolution was taking place in the former Soviet Union. Our members once again were key in helping Boris, who came to the United States on a temporary visa to work at a Jewish summer camp, achieve political asylum, and enter Lehigh University and ultimately earn a PhD. There are, of course, other stories that could be told, but the key lesson is one of activism on behalf of Jews in need. There is no way to know what the future holds – but I hope that if the challenge of helping another Jew, whether in a foreign country, or more pressingly in Bethlehem, arises, that members of this congregation will again step up to help them and do whatever is necessary, no matter how difficult.
When I mention Jews in a foreign country, I do not include Israel. Israel is our country and we should never think of it as foreign. Supporting Israel comes in many forms, including financially, whether through contributions to the Jewish Federation of the Lehigh Valley, or direct donations to organizations or institutions or individuals you know in Israel, or through the purchase of Israel Bonds or even through investing in the Israeli stock market. But it isn’t just about money. It is also about writing letters, to the editor or to members of congress when needed. It is about having conversations with non-Jewish co-workers or neighbors who probably do not even know the details of American history, let alone the history of the Middle East. That would presume, of course, that you are familiar with the history of Israel. We do not all agree on the path Israel should follow to achieve peace, but we should all agree that we are bonded to Israel with super glue and any attempt to sever from each other will leave both, Israel and us, diminished and in pain.

We have worked together on behalf of the poor. We collect food all year to give to food banks and make a special effort for the High Holidays with Project Isaiah and at Purim. We demonstrate both our generosity and our awareness that there are Jews and non-Jews in the Lehigh Valley who would go hungry without us. We also have a group of dedicated volunteers who go once a month to New Bethany Ministries to prepare and serve a meal at their soup kitchen. We have established a fund at Jewish Family Service which allows us to support Brith Sholom members in a professional and confidential manner. Over the past several years, we have helped Brith Sholom members with financial problems deal with utility bills, health insurance payments, home health aides, food and I imagine other crises. Through our Endowment Fund, we have found donors to support this effort. This fund and this level of cooperation between Family Service and synagogue, could, and should, serve as a model to all congregations. The Rabbi’s Discretionary Fund has helped the poor, some of whom are total strangers who walk into Brith Sholom with stories that are totally unbelievable, except for the fact that they need help. While the sums are not great, help is available, in large part because Brith Sholom members have entrusted me to act on their behalf. The new rabbi will also need your
support, if he or she is to continue this tradition of discreet tzedakah.

We have attempted, and at times succeeded, in providing resources for the oldest members of the congregation. For decades, we supported the Leisure Group and for a few years now its successor, the Simcha Club. But to date, the greatest achievement for the older members of the Lehigh Valley Jewish community was Beth Tikvah. Several members of Brith Sholom played critical roles in establishing and overseeing Beth Tikvah. For a few years, we even were able to offer kosher meals on wheels through the Beth Tikvah kitchen, with our members providing the transportation of lunches to people’s homes.

There are other Brith Sholom members who quietly have given countless hours over many years to meetings in an effort to do even more for Jewish seniors, particularly in the area of housing. Although those efforts could be characterized as failures, in that we have not yet achieved concrete results, I would say it is premature to offer a final evaluation. I recently received a call from one of these undeterred individuals about another meeting, another possibility. Some people give up in the face of failures, others are determined to succeed. For several years I have said by the time we do something about a facility, I will be ready to move into it. But even in retirement, this is an area where I intend to continue to be involved and advocate for all older Jews, both those who can afford anything and those who can afford nothing.

In these various endeavors, we have fulfilled the vision of Isaiah from this morning’s haftarah in which the prophet characterizes our fasting. “This is my chosen fast: to loosen all the bonds that bind people unfairly, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry, take the homeless into your home. Clothe the naked when you see him, do not turn away from people in need.”

Although less important than the human element, but still significant, we have addressed major areas of finances. For those who were here about thirty years ago,
probably no achievement was as great as moving Brith Sholom from the south side to this location in the mid-1980s. When I arrived in 1975, the Brith Sholom Community Center was fifty years old, had a small mortgage and large leaks both in the roof and in one of its exterior walls. There was no perpetual care fund and no endowment fund. Today, we have a thirty year old building whose long term maintenance will need to be closely monitored. We have a substantial endowment fund which is critical to the future and a helpful perpetual care fund which offsets some of the cemetery maintenance. Just for this building, its expansion and the two funds, endowment and perpetual care, our predecessors, together with you and me, have raised about six million dollars. I doubt that many congregations this size could say the same.

In my opinion, we have achieved these various goals, human and financial, because you allowed me to lead and you were willing to support communal efforts. I hope you will allow my successor to lead and that you will support him or her in the dreams and goals she or he will have for the Jewish community at Brith Sholom and beyond. It means rowing together. As Dr. Williams said about the ditty: rowing “is not a one shot deal; you're going to have to DO something consistently.” Right now, our community is too small for anyone to say, “I did my share, let someone else serve now.” The new rabbi will need your help and he or she will have very limited knowledge, if any, of what you did in the past. Each of us will need to keep rowing if we want the Brith Sholom community to grow in numbers and strength. I could not have achieved anything worthwhile without the hard work, time commitment, insights and generosity of many wonderful congregants and even a few cranky ones. My successor will not be able to succeed with any less.

Dr. Williams also advised us: “Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily... Be happy, this is not a dress rehearsal, this is the real thing. We get one shot in this lifetime, so make it an enjoyable journey. It says Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, Merrily, not grudgingly, grudgingly, grudgingly don't waste time being upset and angry, enjoy your life.” I would add that for life to be an enjoyable journey, it needs to be a meaningful
journey. For it to be a meaningful journey, I think you have to help others, in and out of the Jewish community; I think you need to be part of something larger than yourself; that is among the items God requires of us.

Life is a dream, in part, because it is short. Do your best to go gently down the stream. We will all make mistakes, the High Holidays hold out the hope that we can correct most, if not all of them. I have had my failures, I have made my mistakes, huge and small, and I will always have some regrets. But I know that without the love and support of my wife, Toby, there would have been only failures and no successes. Clergy spouses never receive the appreciation they deserve. With the stream of time, many have forgotten or never knew that Toby taught for years in our Religious School and served for a decade or more as the “Kiddush lady,” for every Shabbat and festival. I can still picture her on the High Holidays, a young woman in her early twenties, sitting in the first row, the first seat in the east balcony of the old sanctuary on the south side. That was the so called “Rebbetzin’s seat.” Everyone had to know where to find her. Intentionally, or by the nature of life, Toby and later our children were on display. Toby handled that and much, much more with grace and class. She filled the gaps of time and presence with our children that this profession required of me. She supported me at times when others would not have. I had and have the family I dreamed about as a child. Now it is time for me to give Toby, my children and grandchildren some of the time I took from them over the decades.

The stage is set for a new beginning for both the congregation and for me. Life may seem like a dream, but there is more for us to do. Yogi Berra was once asked, “What time is it?” He looked at his watch and said, “It’s now!” Now is the time for us as well. May we each of us go gently and merrily down the stream.

AMEN